

Jesus Predicted a First-Century Return

Copyright © 2008-2010 by Michael A. Fenemore

Revised: 2010 Jun 22

Although Jesus did not know the “day and hour” of his return (Matt. 24:36), he knew it would take place before his generation had expired (Matt. 24:34). This clearly precludes a delay spanning two millennia or even a single century. In other words, the second coming of Christ must be an event in the past.

Matt. 10:23

Jesus instructed his disciples to hurry because the time for preaching before his return was relatively short:

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, *you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.* (Matt. 10:23, ESV throughout unless otherwise noted.)

This emphatic statement leaves no room for an enormous delay. It would certainly not have taken thousands of years to reach the cities of Israel. Moreover, most of those cities were destroyed by A.D. 70. So Christ’s return must have occurred by that time.

This verse has caused no little discussion. Some have even said the Lord Jesus made a mistake here!¹

—*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary*

Matt. 16:27-28

Jesus knew the approximate time of his return and the judgment. He guaranteed they would occur within the lifetime of his contemporaries:

²⁷For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸*Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.* (Matt. 16:27–28)²

¹ Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen and H. Wayne House, *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), Matt. 10:23.

² Some translations insert a paragraph break at verse 28. However, the NA/UBS Greek New Testament, on which most modern Bibles are based, does not.

Jesus promised his followers that the kingdom would soon come (Matt. 16:28). After revealing to his followers the agonies they would face, Jesus, having just spoken of recompense and final judgment, offered a vision of his coming in the kingdom.³

—*Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*

Matt. 24:33-34

Responding to questions regarding signs to precede the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24:3), Jesus emphatically declared the entire Olivet Prophecy would be fulfilled before his generation had passed:

³³So also, when *you* see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴*Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.* (Matt. 24:33–35).

The very disciples to whom Jesus was speaking would see “all these things.” They were to regard them as signs that Jesus was “at the very gates.” The temple was destroyed in A.D. 70. Therefore, the rest of “these things” must have taken place about the same time. They included the preaching of the gospel “throughout the whole world” (v. 14), the appearance of “the abomination of desolation” (v. 15), “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” (v. 30) and the gathering of “his elect” (v. 31).

This saying is puzzling—Jesus seems to have predicted that he would come again before the first generation of his disciples died out.⁴

—*NLT Study Bible*

...he was wrong. He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else. It is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible.⁵

—C. S. Lewis

Luke 21:22, 28, 31

Luke’s account of the Olivet Discourse reveals that the events surrounding the temple’s destruction would mark the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy culminating in the resurrection, rapture and arrival of the kingdom of God:

³ Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 412.

⁴ *NLT Study Bible* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008), Luke 21:32.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), 98.

Jesus Predicted a First-Century Return

Copyright © 2008-2010 by Michael A. Fenemore
Revised: 2010 Jun 22

...these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. (Luke 21:22); ...when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (v. 28); ...when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. (v. 31)

When Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, his disciples questioned when it would take place and what signs would accompany it. Jesus responded by describing the events surrounding the destruction of the Temple and the return of the Son of Man.⁶

—NLT Study Bible

Rev. 1:3; 22:10

“The revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1) promised the persecuted first-century Christians that the fulfillment of the events predicted therein was “near”:

...the time is near (v. 3); Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. (ch. 22:10)

The time for the fulfillment of the prophecies was near.⁷ John was not to seal up the prophecy because the time of fulfillment was near.⁸

—Believer’s Bible Commentary

The reason John is now told not to seal the book is that the time of its fulfillment is potentially very near.⁹

—Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary

Conclusion

Clearly, Jesus *did* predict a first-century return.

Objections

Objection: Most commentators say Matt. 16:28 refers to the transfiguration described in the following chapter.

Answer: Matt. 16:28 cannot be referring to the transfiguration. Please read *Did the Transfiguration Fulfill Matt. 16:28?*

Objection: You have applied “this generation” in Matt. 24:34 to the first century. Most modern prophecy teachers interpret this differently. Some say it refers to

⁶ NLT Study Bible, Luke 21:5-38.

⁷ William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995), Rev. 1:3.

⁸ MacDonald and Farstad, Rev. 22:10.

⁹ Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary, Rev. 22:10.

the generation alive at the time of Christ’s future return. Others say the Greek word γενεά (*genea*) can mean *race*, suggesting the Jewish race will still be in existence when Jesus returns.

Answer: All such opinions are presumptuous and irrelevant. The only interpretation worthy of consideration is the one taught in Scripture by Christ’s “holy apostles” (Eph. 3:5) who together with the prophets are the foundation of the church of God (Eph. 2:19b-20; Rev. 21:14). Without exception, they understood Christ’s predictions to mean the return of Christ and all related events would occur within their lifetime; their generation. *The Holy Spirit inspired this interpretation!* Those promoting other interpretations attack the very foundation of the church, deny the work of the Holy Spirit and according to Jesus and Paul, could be in danger of eternal condemnation (Mark 3:28-29; Gal. 1:8-9, 12). Please read *The Apostles Predicted a First-Century Return of Christ*.

In Matthew, generation is used particularly for contemporary, unbelieving Jews, especially focusing on the leaders who have led people away from the Messiah (11:16; 12:39, 41–42, 45; 16:4; 23:36).¹⁰

—NLT Study Bible

While some have attempted to relate “generation” (Gr *genea*) to the race of the Jews, indicating the survival of their race until Christ’s return, this seems somewhat stretched.¹¹

—KJV Bible Commentary

Some take it as meaning “race” and thus as an assurance that the Jewish race (nation) will not pass away. But it is very questionable that the Greek term γενεά (*genea*) can have this meaning.

—NET Bible

This generation has been interpreted as the Jewish race (Gk. *genea* may mean ‘generation’ or ‘race’)...It is much more likely that it should be taken in its normal sense of the generation of Jesus’ own day...

—The Eerdmans Bible Commentary

How could the Jews *not* be in existence at the return of Christ? They were the very people to whom Jesus was returning; to destroy some (Luke 21:22) and reward others (v. 28). Why would anyone ever make such an unnecessary statement as “Truly I say to you,

¹⁰ NLT Study Bible, Matt. 24:34.

¹¹ Edward E. Hindson and Woodrow Michael Kroll, *KJV Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1994), 1949.

Jesus Predicted a First-Century Return

Copyright © 2008-2010 by Michael A. Fenemore

Revised: 2010 Jun 22

you will still be in existence when I return to you?” Clearly, the “Jewish race” argument is beyond just weak, it is ridiculous.

Objection: You suggest the gospel was preached to the whole world by A.D. 70. That is impossible.

Answer: Actually, it was preached to the whole world by A.D. 57. Please read *Was the Gospel Preached to the Whole World?*

Objection: In your comment regarding Luke 21:28, you suggest the disciples’ “redemption” refers to the rapture. However, it could simply be referring to their protection from events related to the Jewish war with the Romans.

Answer: First-century Christians were expecting to see Jesus appear out of a cloud “in the same way” he disappeared *into* a cloud at his ascension (Acts 1:9-11). The instruction “raise your heads,” i.e., look upward, points to the rapture; the day when they would be “changed” (1 Cor. 15:51) having their bodies transformed to be like Christ’s glorious body (Phil. 3:21). The Greek word ἀπολύτρωσις (*apolutrosis*) used here for “redemption” is the same word Paul used in Rom. 8:23 when he spoke of “the redemption of our bodies.” He employed it again in Eph. 4:30 referring to “the day of redemption.” It’s doubtful anyone would argue this phrase refers to protection from the war. In other places, *apolutrosis* always refers to releasing or setting free. It never means protection. Luke 21:28 foresees first-century Christians being set free from their physical bodies. By tying the redemption of first-century Christians to his vengeance on the Jews, Jesus was simply reiterating Isaiah’s prophecy:

¹The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
²to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God; (Isa. 61:1–2).

For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and my year of redemption had come. (Isa. 63:4)

This does not refer exclusively to the resurrection of the dead. Christ’s promise in Luke 21:28 referred to living Christians watching and waiting for his return. If the first-century living Christians were not raptured at the destruction of Jerusalem, then they were not redeemed as promised, and Christ did not take them to

be where he was (in heaven) as he promised in John 14:3.

Objection: Granted, Rev. 1:3 and 22:10 say, “the time is near.” However, this phrase should not be taken literally. Peter said, “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” (2 Pet. 3:8). God does not count time the way we do.

Answer: Over 600 years before Revelation was written, Daniel’s vision was sealed because the events predicted would not occur for a long time: “the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end” (Dan. 12:9). However, in Revelation, the prophecy was *not* sealed because the time for its fulfillment was near (Rev. 22:10). Such clear examples of seals being used to signify timing must be acknowledged no matter how we choose to interpret of 2 Pet. 3:8. Otherwise, the obvious symbolism would be rendered meaningless (sealed means a long time, unsealed means a short time). If Peter intended to imply that any reference to nearness could actually mean a thousand years, why did he claim, “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Pet. 4:7)? How could he have written with such confidence if he considered the timing to be so hopelessly unknowable? Moreover, why would *any* of God’s time-restricted predictions have been made at all if they meant something no one could understand? God may as well have kept them to himself for all the assurance such predictions might offer anyone on Earth. No, God was speaking in terms *we* understand. The thousand-year hypothesis sounds appealing only to futurists so desperate to neutralize Rev. 1:3 and 22:10 they will accept just about anything that allows them to preserve their erroneous paradigm.

Contrast these instructions with those of Daniel 12:4. In Daniel the time was far off; here it is near.¹²

—KJV Bible Commentary

Objection: Granted, Jesus predicted a first-century return. However, C. S. Lewis, arguably the greatest Christian author of the 20th century, concluded Jesus was wrong: “He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else.”

Answer: Lewis took this preposterous position because, although he was honest enough to admit a first-century return was predicted, he evidently failed to consider the possibility it may have actually come to pass.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2719.

Jesus Predicted a First-Century Return

Copyright © 2008-2010 by Michael A. Fenemore

Revised: 2010 Jun 22

Under the Old Covenant, anyone making false predictions in the name of God was to be executed:

²⁰But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name *that I have not commanded him to speak*, or who speaks in the name of other gods, *that same prophet shall die.*²¹ And if you say in your heart, *'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'*—²²when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, *if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken*; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. (Deut. 18:20-22)

At least three times, Jesus prefaced a prediction of a first-century return with the emphatic phrase “truly, I say to you” (Matt. 10:23; 16:28; 24:34). If he was wrong, then he was a false prophet worthy of death. Lewis unwittingly provided justification for Christ’s crucifixion.

Jeremiah reaffirmed the criterion by which a prophet should be validated:

Only when his predictions come true can we know that he is really from the LORD. (Jer. 28:9b, NLT)

Jeremiah was referring to the false prophet Hananiah who was killed by God for making a time-restricted false prediction (Jer. 28:1-17).

Ezekiel condemned false prophets:

Thus says the Lord GOD, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! (Ezek. 13:3)

Zechariah *strongly* condemned false prophets:

...his own father and mother will tell him, *'You must die, for you have prophesied lies in the name of the LORD.'* And as he prophesies, *his own father and mother will stab him.* (Zech. 13:3b, NLT)

God ensures predictions made by *his* prophets do not fail:

¹⁹And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and *let none of his words fall to the ground.* ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. (1 Sam. 3:19); Behold, there is a man of God in this city [Samuel], and he is a man who is held in honor; *all that he says comes true.* (ch. 9:6)

²⁴This is what the LORD says...“I am the LORD... ²⁵*I expose the false prophets as liars...*I cause the wise to give bad advice, thus proving them to be fools. ²⁶*But I*

carry out the predictions of my prophets!” (Isa. 44:24-26, NLT)

If Christ’s predictions failed so abysmally in the first century, why would any sensible person trust him for a future fulfillment — or salvation?

There is only one acceptable conclusion: Jesus was right. Otherwise, he was a false prophet to be counted with the “liars” and “fools” deserving execution. If he was wrong, we Christians are wasting our time studying his unreliable predictions in the supposed “inerrant” or “infallible” Word of God.

All Scripture referring to end-time events must relate to the persecution of Christians under Nero, the Roman civil war and the Jewish revolt against Rome (A.D. 64-70) which culminated in the destruction of the temple and the end of animal sacrifices. The promised return of Christ, resurrection, rapture and judgment must have occurred during that period. The interpretation of every difficult prophetic passage must be consistent with this premise. Please read *Timeline: The Great Tribulation*.

Download this article in PDF format at
<http://www.Preterism.info>

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996, 2004. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Scripture quoted by permission. Quotations designated (NET) are from The NET Bible® Copyright © 2005 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. www.netbible.com All rights reserved. Biblical Studies Press, The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible (Biblical Studies Press, 2006; 2006).